

Going to School

By SMITA JAIN



Inspiring children through colorful books, movies and role models

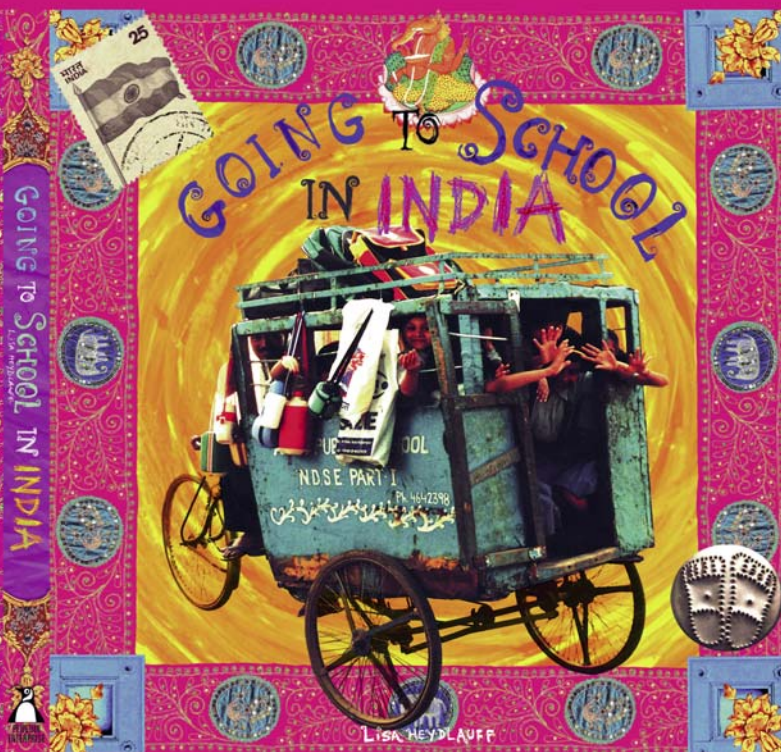
Lisa Heydlauff's office is no ordinary workplace: an endearing pug pup bounds over to greet me as I step inside and the colorfully painted walls are festooned with

India in 1998 with a little money, a few contacts and the dream to do something for the welfare of women and children. After a brief stint with a bridal magazine in New Delhi, Heydlauff was hired by UNICEF as a communications consultant to document success stories of UNICEF projects in government schools in Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat and Haryana.

Her trips were to change the direction of

funding for the project, she found generous support from the Bharti Foundation (the charitable arm of Bharti Enterprises) in 2001 for the creation of *Going to School in India*, a children's book featuring 25 ways of getting to school. There has been no looking back since.

Today, *Going to School in India* has found widespread success among children and education practitioners alike: 10 mini-books have been translated into Telugu,



artwork. Hundreds of storybooks from around the world, as diverse in language as in design, line the bookshelves. Creatively designed posters, T-shirts and calendars decorate different parts of the room.

Creativity and color are, in fact, catchwords for the "business" that Heydlauff is engaged in: that of encouraging underprivileged Indian children to go to school through her New Delhi-based non-profit organization, Going to School. Thirty-one-year-old Heydlauff—whose parents live in Scottsdale, Arizona—moved to

Heydlauff's life. It was during these tours, meeting children who traveled through diverse geographical and cultural terrain to attend school, that Heydlauff conceptualized Going to School, a multimedia campaign that, she says, "celebrates every child's right to go to school and participate in an inspiring education that is relevant to their lives."

Her idea was to create imaginative and inspiring media that captured the real-life stories of everyday children going to school across India. Though she admits that it was initially difficult to find seed

Tamil, Oriya, Kannada and Hindi, to be given to children free of cost in government schools; 500,000 mini-books will be distributed to 45,000 primary schools in Orissa, reaching more than 5 million children. In addition to the books are nine short films—each of which recounts a day in the life of a child going to school somewhere in India—that are aired twice a day by the popular children's channels POGO and Cartoon Network and also on National Geographic. Since its founding, Going to School has received support from a number of U.S.-based agencies,

including the Global Fund for Children in Washington, D.C., Global Giving and Ashoka Innovators for the Public.

Heydlauff firmly believes that inspiration is a key element in a child's life, and Going to School's programs, which focus on telling positive stories of children who succeed in going to school despite geographical, physical or social challenges, reflect this. "I realized there was lots of media coverage about what did not work. But what about that which did work? I believe inspiration can change the world. And, as I traveled more, I felt positive stories about education could be told in a celebratory, transcendent way that showed schools could be fun, relevant to children's lives. And that communities, organ-

colleagues traveled through the Hindi-speaking belt of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, interacting with people in cities, towns and villages, to find 15 women who could be icons, encouraging girls to stay in school.

Two of these Girl Stars are Madhuri Kumari, a woman who defied social convention to become a leader in her village in Uttar Pradesh; and Anita Khushwaha, a 17-year-old who became the first woman beekeeper in Bihar. Each woman succeeded in completing her schooling despite challenging circumstances, and education was a platform for them to achieve their ambitions. "Girl Stars are extraordinary tales of ordinary girls," explains Heyd-

lauff. "It's about what one million girls do, not one in a million. A Girl Star is a young girl or woman who is able to do what she does because she is part of a larger community where everyone has to work together to help things change; she had the courage to begin it, and the strength to take everyone with her." "Girl Stars" will be rolled out by UNICEF on TV channels and radio stations in 2007.

Heydlauff and her team are looking forward to Going to School's latest and perhaps most ambitious project, Be an Entrepreneur (BE!). This 50-book, 13-part



watch TV. I always wait for Monday to go to school."

Munna marches past, carrying his oil painting outside. "If we stay at home we have to work, watch the noisy pump, and make sure nothing breaks. You can get hurt. It is much better to come to school. We come when we see the mirror."

Tent-school teachers call children to school by catching light with a mirror and focusing that light on a distant house. Sounds of voices or school bells are lost in the desert. When the kids see the reflecting light, they know it is time to come to school.

Kneeling beside a tray of precious freshwater, the children take turns blowing drops of oil paint into delicate designs. Anji dips in a piece of paper, admires her creation, and carefully carries it out into the desert to dry.

Just as there is no water in this desert, there is no electricity. Raju, age 10, explains, "We had TV in the village, but here we have not seen it for a while. I don't like it when we have a holiday from this school in the desert because then I do not get to see my friends or

Chunda, age 10, raises his voice because he has some suggestions. "We have a mirror, but we need another mirror to see how we look and make our hair nice, a drum to sing songs, a cricket bat and ball, and, because we have used them all up today, more paints." Standing up, Chunda continues, "And more bicycles so everyone can come to school! I come here because I want to be a teacher in the tent school so I can do something good for salt-pan workers."

Seeing the other children collect their tiffin tins, Anji does the same. She finds a place to sit in the shade and opens up her tiffin tin to share her lunch with her friends. Tearing a piece of chapati, she rolls the soft flat bread in her sun-baked hands and watches the wind play with the edges of her oil painting in the desert.

Ramesh, age 6, his sister, Samta, age 12, and his brother, Chunda, age 10, ride three on a bicycle to school. They travel six kilometers, and it takes them one hour. Ramesh has a red bandage around his ankle because his foot got caught in the bicycle wheel.

The colorful mini-book Going to School in India focuses on positive stories of children who manage to attend school despite geographical, social and physical challenges.

izations and individuals could change the way children go to school, if they believe in possibilities—if they try," she says.

Going to School is in its second phase with Girl Stars, a project that creates icons of everyday women and girls who have, by going to school, changed their lives and the lives of others. For the project, Heydlauff and six of her Delhi-based

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School. Except that Heydlauff, for now, has no plans of "going home."

"Every day I wake up feeling that what we have to do today is important. It may not be changing the way children see their lives every day, but on a broader scale, for a moment, it is," she says. "Inspiration comes in a second and changes the direction of your life. That is what we do, we inspire children and inspire change, as many days out of the week that we possibly can." 4

Smita Jain is an American freelance writer based in New Delhi.

Photographs courtesy Going to School